

By Daniel Barlow, Barre Montpelier Times Argus

U.S. Rep. Peter Welch, a member of the powerful House governmental oversight committee, on Wednesday called for an investigation into reports that a military contractor tried to bribe Iraqi officials.

The Vermont Democrat said Blackwater Worldwide needs to be held accountable after allegations arose this week in The New York Times that the company tried to use \$1 million as a bribe to downplay a violent killing in Iraq in 2007.

Welch, who has been critical of Blackwater in the past, said the company has "earned a reputation as a reckless and dangerous organization."

"Early reports indicate that Blackwater may have violated the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act and potentially interfered with a grand jury inquiry by issuing these bribes," Welch wrote to the chairman of the oversight committee. "The United States government simply cannot turn a blind eye to such actions."

The Times broke the story Tuesday that Blackwater executives allegedly authorized secret payments of up to \$1 million to Iraqi officials to quell criticism of a September 2007 incident in which company security guards killed 17 Iraqi civilians in Baghdad.

During its heyday during the Bush administration, Blackwater netted more than \$1 billion in government contracts to provide security in Iraq. But allegations that it was abusing its powers, including the 2007 killing of unarmed civilians, led to the company being kicked out of the country and many of its contracts with the U.S. government halted.

Welch became a member of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform soon after he took office as a congressman in early 2007. Under then-Chairman Henry Waxman, D-Calif., the committee began investigating Blackwater after allegations arose in August 2007

that guards killed 11 Iraqis.

At the time, Waxman and Welch called for all government funding for Blackwater to be terminated.

"They went from \$700,000 in 2003, when the war began, to over a billion dollars by 2007," Welch told the news program "Democracy Now!" more than two years ago. "It's just an incredible waste of taxpayer money. It dishonors the Code of Military Conduct. Our soldiers are over there. They abide by rules. Blackwater doesn't."

Welch is in Pakistan this week as part of a trip with the committee's subcommittee on national security and foreign affairs. He is scheduled to discuss the trip with Vermont media today.